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'This Thick Soup Of Values-Blather'

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HOUSTON—The Republican convention succeeded in the sense that the party clearly spoke its mind. It was, perhaps, a costly success because it proved that there can indeed be indecent exposure of the mind as well as the body. Let us begin with the president's speech, which had the merit of being merely inadequate rather than, as many others were, strange.

His speech was not up to the demands that his political condition placed upon it. Judged, as the speech must be, against the background of behavior that his condition has caused, his speech was (in T.S. Eliot's phrase) "dry sterile thunder without rain."

It is not news that when Nature was dishing up rhetorical gifts, Bush did not hold out his plate. But by the verve of his delivery here he proved, again, that practice makes adequate. Unfortunately, this adequacy was a reminder that his problem has not been his lack of style but rather his abundance of insincerity.

The speech would have been far better for a candidate for a first term. As the thirteenth reiteration of mostly familiar items, from tax cuts to school choice to term limits, for which he has been only intermittently and impotently ardent, it repeatedly raised a ruinous question. For example, when the man under whom domestic spending and regulations have exploded says, "government is too big and costs too much," people wonder why years five through eight will be better than years one through four have been.

The reasonable suspicion will be that the passion Bush showed at the podium Thursday night was ginned-up for, and will not survive, this phase he calls his "campaign mode."

But at least his speech was superior to many given here because it was about things that constitute a recognizable agenda of governance. Viewed against the American political tradition, Wednesday night, that bath in "family values," was extraordinary and, properly understood, unpleasant.

Once upon a time political parties talked about things that were clearly public matters, things government could promote or prevent, things like land for homesteaders, anti-trust policies, rural electrification, Social Security, medical care, defense and so on. Not so Wednesday night.

Then Republicans made "family values" their focus. In the process they showed that their view of government is out of focus, and they pounded the phrase "family values" into shapeless mush with a bad odor. Just slightly below the surface of Wednesday's touchy-feely sensitivity session was a serrated edge intended to open in both Clintons wounds that cannot be sutured in 75 days.

Marilyn Quayle's speech was evidence for those who say women should be kept out of combat not because they are too physically frail or morally fine but because they are too fierce to respect the rules of war. In a speech that launched an evening of sustained innuendo, she said—well, tiptoed to the edge of saying—that Bill Clinton "took drugs" and "joined in the sexual revolution" and "dodged the draft" ("ran from his responsibilities" was Lynn Martin's version an hour later). And he probably believes "that commitment, marriage and fidelity" are "just arbitrary arrangements."

As for Mrs. Clinton, well, Mrs. Quayle implied that Mrs. Clinton is one of those women who "wish to be liberated from their essential natures as women" and who in the 1960s believed—may still; can't be sure—that "the family was so oppressive that women could only thrive apart from it."

Next, Barbara Bush said: "However you define family, that's what we mean by family values." Fogginess is, apparently, a Bush family value. Her contribution to the evening's thoughts about government (this was a political convention, wasn't it?) was that families are good. But coming hard on the heels of Mrs. Quayle's philippic, and at the end of a day spiced with Pat Robertson's revelation that the Clintons are hatching "a radical plan to destroy the traditional family," Mrs. Bush was just a kinder, gentler coda to one long innuendo: Democrats may hug their children, but they probably don't really mean it.

The effect of four days' immersion in this thick soup of values-blather was cloying to the point of gagging. It was akin to being congealed in a traffic jam behind a bus belching diesel fumes, and on the bus's bumper, smack in your line of sight, is one of those nagging stickers asking, "Have you hugged your kids today?"

Yes, I have—not that it is any business of these politicians serving as moral cheerleaders. Is there no public business—roads, schools, national defense, stuff like that—they could attend to?

The Republicans' graceless rhetoric here compelled two conclusions.

For all their talk about America's "strength" and "greatness," their tone is of frightened timidity. These are "America the Endangered Species" Republicans, terrified that neither "family values" (see Mrs. Bush's definition, above) nor the nation can survive Mrs. Clinton.

And Republicans have caught a particularly virulent version of the Democrats' quite-virulent-enough tendency (remember the Bork confirmation fight) to turn political disagreement into moral assault.